Decoding the neoliberal subjectivity in self-helping adult learners

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ABSTRACT

This article explores and explains the subjectivity of self-helping adult learners, as depicted in contemporary, best-selling self-help books. It interrogates how those self-help texts embody particular features of self-helping subjectivity by appropriating neoliberalist perspectives on self and the world. It illuminates four salient features of the neoliberal subjectivity of self-helping adult learners: (1) rational and responsible self-management, (2) excessive self-positivity, (3) voluntary self-exploitation and (4) the loosely connected selves without solidarity. These four features of neoliberal subjectivity are intrinsically entangled with one another. Implications of the assemblage of neoliberal subjectivity for research and practice in adult learning are also discussed.

Introduction

Learning throughout life is not just a concept but a fact of our lives (Lee & Friedrich, 2011). In theory, if we learn more and more about our own selves, others, and the social world, learning throughout our life should contribute to liberating us from constraints such as exploitation, ignorance, oppression, prejudice and discrimination (Lee & Friedrich, 2011). Few would dispute that learning throughout life is essential for us to enrich our life expe- riences and deepen our understandings about self and others. In this article, however,   I develop a critique of the persistent influx of neoliberal ideas into global discourses of self-helping adult learners: this, I argue, distorts and erodes the value of learning throughout life. Specifically, I aim to show that neoliberalism dupes adult learners into exchanging their own free-will for the neoliberal discourse of self-helping adult learners.

   Self-help books are not a new phenomenon. Such texts are to be found in an Ancient Egyptian literary genre called *Sebayt* providing lessons about ways of living. An Ancient Chinese text, *The Art of War* by SunTzu, can also be categorised as self-help literature (see,
e.g. Michaelson & Michaelson, 2010). Probably Samuel Smiles's (1859) *Self-help* can be regarded as the first modern self-help book, given the fact that it was so widely read. After Smiles's influential work, the twentieth century saw such giants of the self-help genre as Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, and a steady growth of the genre in Western

societies (see Cutruzzula, 2016 for details). Notably, the last three decades have witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of self-help books globally (cf. Groskop, 2013; Lee, 2013; Rimke, 2000; Seo, 2009; Turken, Nafstad, Blakar, & Roen, 2016), which now feature prom- inently in bestseller lists globally (Groskop, 2013).

The idea of lifelong learning has been increasingly picked up in contemporary, best- selling self-help books, and it is on these that I focus in this article. In much of this literature, lifelong learning is viewed as a key vehicle to life success in an ever-changing global econ- omy. This may be neither surprising nor problematic to some people who are normalised to discourses in self-help literature, because, ostensibly, being a self-helping adult learner is viewed as a pragmatic strategy to adapt to the unstable and competitive global economy.[1] This view resonates with neoliberal policy discourses of lifelong learning where being a self-directed adult learner is expected and encouraged as a key characteristic of active cit- izenship, assuming that a self-directed learner is less dependent upon the welfare state (cf. Griffin, 1999) and consumes learning experiences/opportunities as desirable investments/ commodities (cf. Jarvis, 2009, pp. 11–13). Regarding this phenomenon, more than a decade ago, Jarvis and Griffin (2003) already warned that 'the radical potential in this approach to learning [i.e. self-directed learning] in adult education has been subverted' by its compli- ance with existing social systems in learning goals and its prescriptive and directed nature in learning processes (pp. 3, 4). For Jarvis, 'learning is an existential phenomenon that is co-terminal with conscious living, that is, learning is lifelong because it occurs whenever we are conscious … lifelong learning is neither incidental to living nor instrumental itself – it is an intrinsic part of the process of living …' (Jarvis, 2009, p. 10). Based on this perspective of lifelong learning, I illuminate that the (hidden) problem lies in the epistemological process of idealising individuals who make conscious and relentless efforts to achieve their goals through self-help literature's typical propaganda (e.g. ownership, entrepreneurship, self- responsibility, self-management, self-monitoring, self-regulating and positive thinking). As I will show in this article, the aforementioned vocabularies are susceptible to losing their fundamental values and essential meanings when they are encountered with and encroached by neoliberalism as ideology (Harvey, 2005) and/or governance (Foucault, 1991). That is, by consuming and internalising such lexicons erroneously postulated by self-help literature –
e.g. self-helping readers are hypnotised that they can do 'anything and everything' as a free,
autonomous, and rational agent – self-helping adult learners opt to accommodate neoliberal subjectivity in a distinctive way – i.e. voluntary, continuous self-exploitation that results in serving for neoliberal governance (Han, 2015a; Seo, 2009). The paradox that self-help books do not help adult learners in a neoliberal society resonates with the fundamental question raised by Holford and Jarvis (2000) about who benefits in a lifelong learning society. The par- adoxical feature of self-helping adult learners as neoliberal subjectivities is the message that I intend to make throughout this article. In the following sections, I detail the key argument by shedding light on the four salient features of the neoliberal subjectivity of self-helping adult learners: (1) rational and responsible self-management, (2) excessive self-positivity,
(3) voluntary self-exploitation and (4) loosely connected selves without solidarity.

Need for a critical perspective of best-selling self-help books appropriated by neoliberalism

Neoliberalism penetrates and permeates almost every single public sphere by moulding key public policies and convincing the values of such policies to the public. This phenomenon

has been augmenting globally over the last 30 years and is now salient particularly in Anglo- Saxon countries. Adult learning is not an exception in this growing phenomenon. Global policy discourses of adult learning, significantly postulated and promoted by OECD, the World Bank and the European Union, have adopted and embodied neoliberal perspec- tives and elements (for details, see Boshier, 1998; Field, 2001; Lee & Friedrich, 2011; Lee & Kan, in press; Lee, Thayer, & Madyun, 2008; Milana, 2012; Rubenson, 2015; Tuijnman & Boström, 2002). In other words, neoliberal subjects as ideal or desirable adult learners are articulated either explicitly or implicitly in the policy texts of such international organ- isations (e.g. European Commission, 1993, 1995; OECD, 1996, 2003, 2005; World Bank, 2003a, 2003b, 2011).[2] Research exploring neoliberal subjects in those policy discourses has warned about the privatisation and commodification of the public features of adult learners such as active citizenship (Friedrich & Lee, 2011). However, research focusing on neoliberal influences on adult learners in non-policy texts is relatively thin on the ground, although there has been a growing number of studies which critically investigate self-help industries including self-help books (McGee, 2005; Rimke, 2000), programmes (e.g. Ayers & Carlone, 2007) and media language addressing self-help authors/books (Turken et al., 2016), and there exists a handful of important cultural critiques, which either partially (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2009; Han, 2015a; Illouz, 2007; Seo, 2009) or primarily focus on self-help books (e.g. Lee, 2013; McGee, 2005).

Many adult learners appear to read self-help books routinely; we often see adults brows- ing through the best-selling section, frequently occupied by self-help books, of any book- shop. Even adult learners who do not read self-help books at all may have heard about global best-selling books such as *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey (1989/2013) and *The Secret* by Byrne (2006). If we count popular books incorporating some research element such as *Outliers* by Gladwell (2008) for example, it can be said that many of us have been exposed or normalised to inundating self-help books.

These self-help books have taken over bestseller lists in the global publication market over the last couple of decades (cf. Groskop, 2013). More importantly, all best-selling books highlight the importance of continuing self-improvement and they suggest one common way to do it – i.e. learning and practicing continuously (until we die), which resonates with the idea of learning throughout life. For example, in his book *Outliers* Gladwell (2008) claims that a continuous effort to learn and practice throughout life is the key condition for success by saying 'ten thousand hours is the magic number of greatness' (p. 41). One of his examples to evidence this claim is Bill Gates who spent a considerable time coding during his high school days. To Gladwell, Gates's success is somewhat because of his talent, but is mainly attributed to a huge and continuing investment of time Gates made to practice and apprentice as a lifelong learner. In a similar vein, Anthony Robbins, the guru of self-help industry, summarises his manifesto as CANI – i.e. 'constant and never-ending improvement' (1991/2003, p. 96) – in his super-best-selling self-help book titled *Awaken the Giant Within*. Unlike Gladwell's focus on elites' success, Robbins speaks to average people and preaches them to achieve life success through '…continually pullin[ing] you forward in a constant, never-ending search for improvement. A commitment to CANI! is truly the universal insur- ance policy for *life-long happiness* … (p. 306) … Constantly find ways to improve yourself. Practice the discipline of CANI!; be a *lifelong learner*' (p. 511, italics by me).

In sum, many of internationally best-selling self-help books emphasise the importance of being a lifelong learner to life success. However, vocabularies commonly found in self- help books such as ownership, entrepreneurship, self-improvement, self-responsibility,

self-management and positive thinking are neither value neutral nor context-free lexicons. That is, without critically reflecting wider social structures and contexts swayed by cur- rent socio-political mandates such as neoliberalism, adult learners who voluntarily comply with such mantras are likely to become neoliberal subjects. As I will show in this article, self-managing, self-monitoring, self-regulating and self-disciplining are the integral parts of the socio-political mandate of neoliberalism.

In a performance-oriented system, individuals are proactively subject to forms of external dictation or measures (e.g. metrics, numbers and data) closely linked to their performance. This often stems from anxiety about being left behind within the system, which leads indi- viduals to push themselves to the limit in the name of self-managing, self-monitoring, self-regulating, self-disciplining, etc. At the end of day, their relentless learning and practice for more productivity and better achievement (and for not becoming 'losers') can render them victims to the demand for continuous work and improvement. This can be said as 24/7 activities throughout life – e.g. an endless cycle comprising learning for work, working for consumption and consuming for learn. Adult learners are required to be always 'in the loop' of their work and are asked to go 'the extra mile' for more productivity – i.e. 24/7 self-management. Such 24/7 self-management is synonymous with self-exploitation in that human beings cannot physically keep working on an activity 24/7. Furthermore, in this never-stopping mandate of self-improvement and self-development, adult learners can be separated from social solidarity, because they are, in essence, placed into the situation where they act as atomised consumers for more goods and competitors for more accomplishments. In this regard, the neoliberal governance in a late capitalist society becomes a pathological phenomenon for adult learners.

To substantiate my argument above, my analytical framework of self-help books is informed by several writers such as Byung-Chul Han, Barbara Ehrenreich and Micki McGee. Of them, Byung-Chul Han's approach to neoliberalism, illuminated in his recent book *The Burnout Society*, provides the main analytical leverage in this article. Han (2015a), a German-based contemporary philosopher, views self-helping adult learners as entrepre- neurs of themselves. He argues that late capitalist society is 'no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society' where individuals are 'no longer obedience-subjects but achievement-subjects' (Han, 2015a, p. 8). The Foucauldian world, which controls subjects through various disciplinary apparatus (e.g. schools, hospitals, prisons and barracks), is being replaced with 'another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories' (p. 8). If Han's argument is correct, the entrepreneurial behaviour of contemporary adult learners who voluntarily adopt self-help techniques such as self-monitoring, self-managing, self-disciplining and self-regulating cannot be explained solely by the lens of Foucault's disciplinary society. This is because the key socio-psychological and pathological mechanism embedded in the voluntary, proac- tive and continuous self-helping behaviour is 'an excess of positivity', not negativity (p. 1). While the Foucauldian approach to revealing the technologies and techniques of neoliberal governance remains as a valid analytical lens, I think it should be complemented by Han's anatomy of neoliberal governance. Neoliberal subjects' voluntary control or discipline over themselves, until they are burned out physically and emotionally (i.e. by self-exploitation) in the name of self-improvement (or self-fulfilment), should be understood through the lens of excessive self-positivity. Positivity, from this perspective is, in essence, the assemblage of a variety of lexicons, such as entrepreneurship, happiness, positive thinking, self-therapy,

self-management, self-made person, self-responsibility, self-directed learning (SDL) and so on.

I focus here primarily on a handful of best-selling self-help books internationally. I acknowledge that no systematic scheme was employed in making this selection. It was sim- ply too daunting a task to read every single best-selling self-help book published over recent decades: there are hundred such books and they are very heterogeneous in genre (e.g. how-to manuals, psycho-spiritual genre, leadership and organisation, personal development, etc.). Rather, I focused primarily on a dozen of contemporary best-selling self-help books,[3] which I had already read closely before this research. Some of the books I read several times in order to develop an in-depth understanding. In sum, I believe my analysis targets a relatively representative group of best-selling self-help books with very close and repeated reading. I adopt a discourse analysis approach. Ideas articulated in self-help books are not neutrally expressed – i.e. they are politically and ideologically motivated (Lee, 2007). As Fischer (2003) points out, the social meanings embedded in particular texts can be better interrogated 'by reference to an ideological position' because, texts as discourses 'have an intentional or unintentional relationship or position to one [ideology]' (p. 77). In brief, a discourse analysis approach is employed to illuminate how social and political mandates
of neoliberalism are inscribed in self-help texts.

In the following sections, I detail four salient features of neoliberal subjectivity in the selected books. I conclude by exploring the implications of the assemblage of the neoliberal subjectivity embedded in self-help books for adult learners, and thereby search for alterna- tive, counter-hegemonic perspectives from a critical adult learning position.

Rational and responsible self-management

In the self-help books, individuals are postulated as self-managing subjects with rational- ity and responsibility. In particular, as self-helping adult learners they must manage their learning and practice. The integral part of managing learning and practice with rationality is managing 'time' for learning and practice. For example, one of the key messages from Stephen Covey's (1989/2013) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is rational management of time. As the key principle of time management, he states 'Put first things first' and pin- points the need for spending more time on what is not urgent but important (pp. 154–194). According to McGee (2005), Covey's emphasis on self-mastery in the book is 'reduced to the rational management of the self-prescribed in the use of calendars' (p. 153). Put another way, self-helping adult learners are constantly told to regulate themselves in the name of self-management and self-mastery by 'watching the clock' (p. 153). In recent years, time management in self-help books has been further specified from a micro perspective. In the book *One Minute Manager*, self-help experts Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson[4] (1982) encourage leaders (and also followers) in an organisation to be a One Minute Manager 'who gets good results without taking much time' because he/she 'always makes it clear what our responsibilities are and what we are being held account for' (p. 27). Blanchard further reiterates this idea of One Minute Management in his subsequent books *Self Leadership and the One Minute Manager* (2005) and *The One Minute Entrepreneur* (2008).

In a similar vein, self-help books emphasise 'watching the scale' which can be interpreted
as 'the adherence to diets and fitness regimes' for body management (McGee, 2005, p. 153). The British Sociologist Catherine Hakim's term 'erotic capital' (2011) helps us to understand

why and how the body management discourse in self-help literature has permeated organ- isational life. Erotic capital refers to

> a nebulous and crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills – a combination of physical and social attractiveness which makes some men and women agreeable company and colleagues, attractive to all members of their society and especially to the opposite sex (Hakim, 2011, p. 1).

Hakim (p. 198) goes on to claim that 'Physical attractiveness enhances productivity in man- agement and professional occupations, possibly due to self-fulling prophecies, but mainly because attractive and agreeable people are easier to work with, and more persuasive'.

In sum, while self-help gurus all agree with the importance of rational self-management of time and body for one's own development, learning, performance and practice, they rarely talk about how to access financial support or resources for self-development. Probably, the reason for this lopsided focus on time and body is because it is presumed that time and body are given to everyone equally; 'One's body and time are one's limited "human capi- tal"' (McGee, 2005, p. 153). The hidden message is, therefore, that life success (and failure) is swayed by how one manages the (seemingly) equally given time and body effectively. In his single authored mega-selling self-help book titled *Who Moved My Cheese?* (1998), Spencer Johnson, the co-author of *One Minute Manager,* conveys another key message that individuals in an organisation should proactively cope with unexpected changes and should quickly adapt to change. However, the flipside of this message is just a repetition of the aforementioned self-books; it is the individual's own sole responsibility to deal with any changes (e.g. the cheese has gone). That said, it does not matter 'what' or 'why' it happens to us. What matters is how we react to it – i.e. the message is that 'the problem is us'. In fact, this message conveyed in *Who Moved My Cheese?* is not new. It echoes one of the habits of the highly effective people described by Stephen Covey: 'It's not what happens to us, but our response to what happens to us that hurts us'. (p. 81). This is why Covey redefines responsibility as 'response-ability'. Similar propositions are found in other self-help books (Peck, 1978). However, is it not also important for adult learners to interrogate 'what' hap- pens and 'why' it happens if they wish to address certain (unexpected) changes happening to their life effectively?

The underlying message of self-responsibility in *Who Moved My Cheese?* proved per-

fectly timed when in the late 1990s the global financial crisis triggered mass lay-offs – in the name of restructuring – in many countries.[5] Ehrenreich (2009) criticises the tendency of self-help authors in that they believe that life failure is entirely reducible to individuals' problems such as neglect, sloth and negative thinking. For example, Ehrenreich criticises Rhonda Byrne, author of *The Secret*, for 'depraved smugness', because of her 'insistence that the "law of attraction"[6] allows for no accidents and no exceptions, even for victims of a natural disaster, like the 2004 tsunami' (cited in Sanneh, 2010).

For adult learners, individuals' self-management of learning processes, as proposed by self-help authors, boils down to a narrow portfolio aligned to employability. This port- folio functions as commodifying individuals' learning experiences and outcomes in the name of competence. This could include not just traditional cognitive competences but also social-psychological competences (the so-called twenty-first century skills), plus physical attractiveness (such as erotic capital, mentioned above). That is, self-helping adult learn- ers become entrepreneurial subjects who relentlessly respond to what is demanded by neoliberal governance such as attending workshops for improving cognitive competence,

getting therapeutic counselling for better controlling emotions and social skills, working out regularly and even getting plastic surgery for physical attractiveness. In sum, adult learning in contemporary self-help books becomes an ongoing process of renewing and upgrading one's wide range of competence, which should be visualised in a measurable and compatible form such as competence portfolio. In this context, self-value is measured and exchanged as market values through one's portfolio (Walkerdine, 2006). To increase the self's market value, self-mobilisation of resources and opportunities is essential to fit in what the neoliberal system demands.

The pitfall in this (i.e. maximising one's market value) is that it does not always lead to stable employment. In a real-world context, more often than not, individuals' employability is more swayed by economic structures and labour market conditions than their compe- tence. Rampant unemployment among young adults across many countries may partly be because of skill mismatches or their lack of skills, but it is also, importantly, because of the global economic recession since 2008. Despite the impact of macro socio-structures, neoliberal subjectivity is imposed on self-helping adult learners through propaganda such as 'Brand You' or 'CEO of Me Inc.' (Peters, 1999) where adult learners' competence should be tangible in the form of brand and portfolio; adult learners are asked to be entrepreneurs of themselves. Therefore, adult learning is reduced to just a process of building a learning portfolio in response to flexible labour markets. In this process, a self-helping adult learner as a commodified subject is encouraged to be self-directed for his or her learning.[7]

Excessive self-positivity

In capturing the crucial feature of our contemporary era, Han (2015a, p. 1) posits:

> Every age has its signature afflictions. Thus, a bacterial age existed; at the latest, it ended with the discovery of antibiotics ... From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first cen- tury is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons. Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are not infections, but infarctions; they do not follow from the *negativity* of what is immunologically foreign, but from an excess of *positivity* (original italics).

In Han's immunological metaphor, late capitalist society is characterised as 'an excess of positivity', not as 'negativity'. He goes on to state that

> 'Yes, we can' ... epitomizes achievement society's positive orientation. Prohibitions, command- ments and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. Disciplinary society is still governed by *no*. Its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers (2015a, pp. 8, 9).

The immunological metaphor resonates with Rimke's analysis of self-help texts; 'self-help techniques [and mandates] operate not so much by way of negative prohibition but by way of positive, productive application' (2000, p. 63). All self-help authors highlight the importance of love of self. To love oneself, being positive to oneself, is indispensable. Being positive to self means being positive to self-desire. Accomplishing self-desire requires self-discipline. This kind of discipline is qualitatively an updated version of Protestantist asceticism, because it is not so much ascetic self-discipline but self-caring.[8] That is, such self-discipline in contem- porary self-help literature requires self-caring and self-positivity, which are fundamentally different from self-denial. Self-management and discipline with hyper positivity requires an

endless process of self-examination, self-monitoring, self-control, self-correction and more importantly self-hypnosis – e.g. Nike's Just-Do-It spirit, prosperity gospel's manifesto 'God wants you to be rich', Rhonda Byrne's (the author of *The Secret*) 'law of attraction' (you will always get what you think). In this context, it is not surprising to see that contemporary popular self-help books borrow theoretical frameworks or (pseudo)scientific languages from positive psychology literature. In relation to this, a notable problem in the positive thinking promoted by self-help experts (and also in positive psychology literature) is its predominantly conservative characteristic – i.e. 'its attachment to the status quo, with all its inequalities and abuses of power' (Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 170). In this regard, positive thinking in self-help literature is not just about attitude but also about ideology, in that it epitomises the salient feature of neoliberal subjectivity – i.e. excessively optimistic adult learners are hyper-responsible for their learning and performance. This is why the flipside of self-positivity is self-responsibility (Ehrenreich, 2009).

In *QBQ! The Question Behind the Question: Practicing Personal Accountability at Work and in Life*, John Miller (2010) says 'We often can't control circumstances and events. The only thing we have any real control over are our own thoughts and actions ... I can only change me' (pp. 66, 68). So, Miller goes on to say don't blame others or society and don't

ask questions like 'who dropped the ball?' (p. 57), 'when will we get more tools and better systems' (p. 40), or 'why is this happening to me?' (p. 26): 'don't ask why?' (p. 20). Does this sound familiar? Yes: it echoes Stephen Covey's statement: 'It's not what happens to us, but our response to what happens to us that hurts us. Of course, things can hurt us physically or economically and can cause sorrow. But our character, our basic identity, does not have to be hurt at all. In fact, our most difficult experiences become the crucibles that forge our character and develop the internal powers, the freedom to handle difficult circumstances in the future ...' (p. 81). Of course, the 'I-can-only-change-me' spirit (Miller, p. 68) is not in itself wrong in the sense that it does not harm others. In fact, positivity (or positive thinking) is, in general, helpful for well-being. But an excess of positivity is not desirable because it can burn us out. Also, positive thinking without criticality is incomplete. In other words, positivity without criticality can harm the self, because it is not based on authentic self-re- flection that leads us to problematise the social reality – such as power structures – that shape one's desperate situation. Self-help authors' propaganda such as 'I-can-only-change-me' and 'Brand You' or prosperity gospel ministers' preaching such as 'The Power of I am' (Osteen, 2015) is not rooted in critical thinking and reflective learning, but is based on the enchantment of positivity. The common absence in these self-help experts' messages is criticality of socio-economic, cultural, and political issues and contexts. Everything is reduced to internal and personal matters. Therefore, adult learners are encouraged to work on themselves individually and proactively, across a range of social domains, on an ongoing basis (Larner, 2000).

Voluntary self-exploitation

The neoliberal subject of self-management and self-positivity is the one who 'voluntarily exploits' him/herself until he/she is burned out (Han, 2015a). Time management has been the core part of self-management and self-mastery in contemporary self-help literature. Notably, the scope of time management addressed and advised by self-help literature has been expanded to 'non-work' domains. In her analysis of Richard Bolles's all-time best-selling

self-help book *What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Career Changers*, which is revised and published annually, McGee (2005, p. 113) found that the earlier versions of *Parachute* published in the 1970s and early 1980s did not focus on time use in non-work areas such as leisure time. However, by 1987 the topic of maximising private and leisure time (evenings, weekends, lunch breaks and vacation time) 'in search of one's next position' while on the job had swelled. This implies a lack of demarcation between work and private life for contemporary self-helping adult learners. The endless and augmenting requirements placed on self-helping adult learners is evidenced in the book's growing phys- ical scale: 201 pages in the 1972 version; 525 pages in the 1997 edition (cf. McGee, 2005). The blur between private and work life – or more precisely the encroachment of work requirements to various private spaces – implies that our private life is not just destructed but also reconstructed through some form of external dictation and measure. In the contem- porary workplace context, the border between social, emotional, inter-personal dimensions and work performance disappears through management strategies such as the Balanced Scorecard (see footnote 7 for details). This external dictation accompanies old (e.g. the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory or MMPI) and new metrics (e.g. the BSC and EQ, the 'emotional quotient') in order to make private/personal domains (e.g. feeling, character, collegiality and friendship) subordinate to work performance or organisational goals. In other words, self-helping adult learners are required to interrogate, invest and invent certain 'interesting characters' (e.g. EQ or soft skills) favoured by the neoliberal society. The vanishing demarcation between work and private life seems to be replaced with another manifesto that work ought to become a joyful exercise, while play, leisure and

holiday have to become part of work, vice versa.

Because of the vanishing demarcation between work and private life, everything becomes compatible, measurable and marketable. Indeed, a belief has emerged that everything can be quantifiable, which has been called 'data-ism' (Brooks, Feb. 4, 2013). Data-ism, 'the rising philosophy of the day', carries 'certain cultural assumptions – that everything that can be measured and should be measured; that data is a transparent and reliable lens that allows us to filter out emotionalism and ideology; that data will help us do remarkable things – like foretell the future' (Brooks, Feb. 4, 2013). Han (2015b), however, warns against this kind of belief, given that metrics by themselves are not narratives. Numbers are, in essence, not stories. He goes on to argue that 'They [numbers] do not tell anything about self (p. 85)' Rather, 'data-ism itself is an ideology' (p. 81). More precisely, it is a neoliberal ideology comparable with governance by numbers (Ozga, 2009) and metrics (Fioranmonti, 2014). This emergence of data-ism may be linked to McGee's (2005) concept of the enslaved subject. She views the enslaved subject as having dual positions, using the term 'belabored self '. On the one hand, the belaboured self is the subject with free-will pursuing self-reali- sation. On the other hand, it becomes the exploited self. This resonates with Han's (2015a,

p.11) view of the achievement-subject as the neoliberal subject.

> The achievement-subject stands free from any external instance of domination [*Herrschaftsinstanz*] forcing it to work, much less exploiting it. It is lord and master of itself. Thus, it is subject to no one – or, as the case may be, only to itself. It differs from the obedi- ence-subject on this score. However, the disappearance of domination does not entail freedom. Instead, it makes freedom and constraint coincide. Thus, the achievement-subject gives itself over to compulsive freedom – that is, to the free constraint of maximizing achievement. Excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation. This is more efficient than allo-ex- ploitation, for the feeling of freedom attends it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited.

The paradoxical dual position of the achievement-subject – the exploiter as well as the exploited – illuminates the problem in the insidious current situation where self-helping adult learners are encouraged to learn by themselves at every single stage of their life course. For example, Richard Bolles, in the 2014 edition of *Parachute*, asks us to 'learn' and 'unlearn' continuously, which he calls 'the two rhythms of the dance of mission', to find our mission in life. Bolles states that 'we are also engaged in a process of Unlearning' (pp. 272, 273). This suggests to me that the whole, repeated dance-like process is just an endless circle of 'doing something'.[9] Self-help authors encourage adult learners to learn throughout life. Covey highlights this in a metaphor, 'Sharpen the saw' (p. 299). What this so-called principle suggests is that one must 'always be prepared' and so 'never stop learning'. Taken together, Bolles and Covey advise self-helping adult learners to learn and unlearn (the flipside of learn) continuously as the director of life. That said, the process of continuous learning should be self-directed learning (SDL).

SDL is characterised as a learner-oriented approach. In the self-regulation of learning processes, learners must exercise control over learning conditions and the importance of learner experience is emphasised (Lee & Madyun, 2008, p. 115). One of the critical issues facing SDL is, however, 'whether SDL is emancipatory and/or prescriptive', given that it tends to demand that adult learners comply with existing socio-political orders and sys- tems – 'particularly human resource development contexts where it can amount to *directed* SDL' (Leach, 2005, p. 568; original italics). As Collins (1991) and Welton (1995) pointed out, SDL is essentially based on individuals' adaptation to and compliance with existing social systems, given its focus on technical rationality and competitive advantage. Jarvis and Griffin (2003) concisely captured the linkage between self-helping learners and SDL. They suggested that Houle in effect translated Samuel Smiles's (1859) *Self-help* into the tradition of adult education; later this was elaborated by Houle's students Allen Tough and Malcolm Knowles. Tough's approach to SDL was developed through quantitative forms of measurement, while Knowles addressed more knitty-gritty matters such as planning, need and climate. Importantly, Jarvis and Griffin warned that Knowles's approach to SDL

> could easily become a teaching technique, as it now has, in which the learning is both directed and controlled by a facilitator and the radical potential in this approach to learning in adult education has been subverted (pp. 3, 4).

Notably, although self-help books highlight the importance of SDL, the vast majority of self-help books (and related tools and programmes) articulate self-help discourses in an opposite way to SDL. A close look at the narrative structure of self-help books shows a com- monality: the typical structure of narratives in self-help texts is that a wise and savvy mentor serves as the avatar of the self-help author, and the author speaks through the mentor's voice to readers. Also, there is always a young, ambitious, embracing, positive and ready-to-learn mentee, who is, in fact, targeted as the reader. For example, Blanchard and Johnson *The One Minute Manager* begins with a story that 'Once there was a bright young man who was looking for an effective manager. He wanted to work for one. He wanted to become one ... The young man had looked everywhere for an effective manager ...' Eventually, the young man found the manager he was looking for: the manager who defines himself as 'a One Minute Manger' (Blanchard and Johnson, 1982, pp. 11–21). The structure of narratives in the book is that the wise manager tells 'the three secrets' (i.e. one minute goals, one minute praising, and one minute reprimands) to the young man who is ready to listen. The mentor teaches, preaches, counsels, advises, guides, coaches, motivates and cheerleads the mentee

'in one-way conversation'. This is far removed from SDL in principle. The conversation is not based on debates or discussions. The format of conversation between the mentor and the mentee is neither argumentative dialogue nor challenging questions and stimulating answers. Instead, once the mentor gives the mentee a series of lessons (so-called princi- ples or secrets) about things such as time management and building a good habit, always accompanied by cheerleading phrases (e.g. work hard, harder and harder, wake up, be free to, believe it, you will get somewhere), what follows is the mentee's realisation of and admiration for the lessons given. The remaining element is then the mentee's application of the lessons in practice – whether or not the lesson is difficult or feasible in reality.[10] Of course, the outcome of such application is the sole responsibility of the mentee. A similar mentor-mentee narrative structure is found in Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese?* (1998) and also in Blanchard, Lacinak, Tompkins, and Ballard's (2002) *Whale Done!: The Power of Positive Relationships.*

Why, given the one-way conversation structure in most self-help books, do self-help-ing adult learners proactively adopt such external dictation? Probably, they are attracted by tempting ego-centric lexicons; self-caring, self-invention, self-renewal, self-making (or remaking), self-fulfillment, self-realisation, self-actualisation, self-development, self-man- agement, self-mastery, self-governance, etc. To borrow Han's (2015a) words, internalising such lexicons is a 'compulsive freedom', which functions as a 'free constraint' (p. 11) given that the neoliberal subject voluntarily becomes an individual 'project': 'it liberates itself into a project' (p. 46), thereby constituting and consolidating the status quo of neoliberal governance. That said, self-helping adult learners become individualised, voluntary enter- prises by their own accord. They are 'not simply just "free to choose", they are *obliged to be free*' (Rimke, 2000, p. 73; original italics). In the process of internalising such vocabularies, the neoliberal subject as a project – in order to accomplish his/her own project – becomes a self-exploited subject. This is why the self-exploiting subject is at the same time both a self-exploited subject and the self-employed owner of the project. The key source for main- taining the self-exploitation process is self-hypnosis (e.g. see the previous section) drawing from the excess of positivity. In this regard, individuals' free-will, espoused with exces- sive self-positivity and self-hypnosis for endless achievement, functions as a modern-day Panopticon, operating with incentives, motivations and projects for full observability, and thereby maximum control of individuals (cf. Han, 2015b).

Finally, in some self-help books, the never-ending upgrading of self is linked to artistic life. As McGee (2005) points out, 'the artistic mentalité' emerged in the mid-1990s as 'the ideal work model' for the post-industrial labour force. She goes on to summarise artists as (pp. 128, 129):

- trained to work with symbolic forms, so they offer an ideal model for the newly chris- tened 'knowledge workers'
- engaged in a pursuit of excellence for its own sake well before Tom Peters's 1982 'search'
- accustomed to working without supervision
- able to motivate themselves without financial compensation.

A point that should not be overlooked is that there is in essence no substantive difference between the artists described above and workaholics. They are subjects working constantly and voluntarily. They all are required to be always 'in the loop' of their work by themselves and are willing to go 'the extra mile' for self-satisfaction. As mentioned above, this can be

called 24/7 self-management – a twist on Jonathan Crary's (2013) depiction of late capi- talism as a 24/7 society. In his book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, he warns

> … in affluent sectors of the globe, what was once consumerism has expanded to 24/7 activity of techniques of personalization, of individuation, of machinic interface, and of mandatory communication. Self-fashioning is the work we are all given, and we dutifully comply with the prescription continually to reinvent ourselves and manage our intricate identities. As Zygmunt Bauman has intimated, we may not grasp that to decline this endless work is not an option (Crary, 2013, 72).

In sum, continuous self-exploitation means that the neoliberal subject is burned out and devastated at the end of the day – the result of pushing the self to its physical and psycholog- ical limit by continuous work and consumption. Paradoxically, self-help books do not help adult learners as neoliberal subjects. In contrast, persistent and unresolved 'anxiety' about employment, productivity, and performance – rooted in neoliberal subjects – continuously expands the self-help industry.

Loosely connected selves without solidarity

A critical problem is that self-exploitation can end only when individuals' physical lives end, because the incantations of self-help discourse are about the never-ending upgrading of self (e.g. CANI – constant and never ending improvement). Another related problem is the postulation of self-reliance in the process of never-ending upgrading. Self-reliance has an ideological fit with neoliberal governance, given that it 'justifies the retreat of public support and social security from vulnerable individuals' (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015, pp. 95, 96). In recent years, for instance, one of the buzz words penetrating into the South
Korea society – strongly influenced by neoliberal political ideas over the last decade – has been '각자도생' (各自圖生): which literally means that each individual tries to plan and find the way to live. In the context of strong neoliberal influence, the underlying message this conveys is that it is one's own sole responsibility to 'seek individual solutions to systemic
problems' (Turken et al., 2016, p. 42) as a way to look after oneself. The fact is that the ulti- mate winner in a social system based on self-reliance and hyper-competitive free market principles would be only a few elites as described in books such as David Brooks's *Bobos* (2001), or only a few 'homo inventus', as described in Freeland's (2013) book on plutocrats (i.e. the new global super-rich). For this successful minority, self-reliance is synonymous with being self-made. In the self-made man/woman discourse, it is hard to find a narra- tive that opportunities are provided by society. That explains why there is no solidarity in 'self-reliance' and 'self-made' discourses. Likewise, self-help texts negate 'the inherent sociality of being' (Rimke, 2000, p. 62); social solidarity is something wholly alien to them. What matters for these neoliberal subjects is to keep doing something – to be responsible for themselves, not others. But the reality is that the vast majority of them cannot reach their targets; they will remain stuck, locked in the same social class, economic situation and employment status, regardless of their efforts. This kind of phenomenon resonates with the Red Queen's statement to Alice in Lewis Carroll's (1871/2015) *Through the Looking Glass (And What Alice Found There)*: 'Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!' (p. 26). Self-helping adult learners are required, and cheered on, to 'run' as fast as they can without looking back or reflecting their life. But running 'at least twice as fast

as that' does not guarantee staying ahead or reaching certain positional goods. Rather it only means they will stay 'in the same place' or just survive.[11]

I do not think that all self-helping adult learners, who celebrate running as fast as they can, are unaware of their treacherous situation. Probably, most are well aware of it. However, they are forced to accommodate themselves to it, shaped by the multilayered nature of neo- liberal governance: a risk society (Beck, 1992), anxiety society (Botton, 2005), achievement society (Han, 2015b), etc. There is no choice but for them to learn to fit within neoliberal governance, because such a choice is understood as a rational choice for individual subjects. This paradoxical situation can be understood in terms of Harvey's (2005) view that neolib- eralism is becoming 'the modus vivendi' (cited in Turken et al., 2016, p. 44). It also shows how self-help discourses have become the modus operandi of neoliberalism.

To compensate for the absence of social solidarity, self-helping adult learners increasingly float on social media or networking sites. Just to give an example, in Facebook alone, the number of monthly active users reached 1.71 billion people around the world as of 30 June 2016 (Facebook, 2016). However, individual subjects linked to one another through social media such as Facebook or LinkedIn are loosely connected subjects without substantive solidarity. As Bauman (2012) points out, 'What you've acquired is a network, not a "com- munity"... Belonging to a community is a much more secure and reliable condition than having a network – though admittedly more constraining and with more obligations' (p. 178). In social networking sites, the social relations between individuals are often transfer- rable into some quantified form and instrumentalised for the possible creating of monetary profit. As such, getting substantive solidarity out of social networking sites seems difficult at best. Such loosely connected relations might, of course, be something that self-helping learners are looking for (or at least comfortable with). John Sabel (1991, p. 25) notes that

> Only those who participate in ... multiple, loosely connected networks are likely to know when their current jobs are in danger, where new opportunities lie, and what skills are required in order to seize these opportunities. (cited in McGee, 2005, p. 70)[12]

That is, in loosely connected networks, other people become little more than sources for maintaining employability. In a similar fashion, one's 'friends' – connections through social networking websites – only help one feel better or more positive about oneself through dis- plays of numbers of friends, visits, tags and 'Like' buttons. In sum, it seems that the emptiness of the neoliberal subject, the solidarity deficit, is compensated from another source – con- suming symbolic as well as material commodities. The growing market in counselling and therapy appears to be related to the 'consumption' of a variety of therapeutic programmes (e.g. support groups, talk shows, rehabilitation programmes).[13]

Concluding remarks: revisiting critical adult learning

Neoliberal governance marketises every public sphere. In the marketised system, individ- uals are commodified and monetised. They are the subjects of choice and consumption, not the subjects of solidarity. Neoliberal governance imposes competitive consumption on individuals' social relations; neoliberal subjects are autonomous consumers. They are asked to be entrepreneurs of their lives. They are required to choose, and to be responsible for their life choices. To be proactively responsible, if their choice turns out to be wrong or failing they are expected to be self-correcting and self-changing. In this regard, flexibility of individual labour is encouraged. The neoliberal subject is asked to pursue happiness,

and to that end, the neoliberal mandate for its subjects is rational self-management. The core of rational self-management is self-help. As discussed above, self-helping subjects are exploiters as well as exploited. This is the modus operandi of neoliberal governance. Within this context, the neoliberal mandate of self-help is not so much 'the last resort' but 'the only option' for adult learners. Given neoliberalism's emphasis on individual freedom to choose, this is paradoxical: neoliberalism constrains the range of choices that individuals can make to only one option. In this regard, neoliberalism is another name of totalitarianism; neolib- eralism shrinks individuals' freedom by hypnotising individuals with the illusion of 'free constraint' by which neoliberal subjects voluntarily become individual 'projects' for the neoliberal system (cf. Han, 2015a). Freedom, or the free-will exercised by neoliberal subjects, paradoxically constrains emancipation from oppression, discrimination, disconnection and injustice (cf. Seo, 2009). According to Han (2015b), in the Indo-German language, being free etymologically means being with friends, given that Freiheit (freedom) and Freund (friend) share the same etymological root. This suggests that togetherness and/or solidarity are quintessential to freedom.

To recover solidarity, both self-reflection and criticality are required. Neoliberal fabrica- tion constitutes and is also constituted by individual desire. To break the false consciousness fabricated by neoliberal techniques and technologies such as self-help discourses, individual subjects should be equipped with self-reflection as well as criticality about self and society. This is one way to break the self-deceiving process of neoliberal governance. I am concerned about the proliferation in recent years of courses on positive psychology or positive science in universities and adult education institutes (cf. Ehrenreich, 2009). This is an indication of how critical thinking and self-reflection are fading away from our educated life as lifelong learners.

As Peter Jarvis (2009) pointed out, 'learning is a humanistic phenomenon ... and an existential phenomenon' (p. 10). If we accept this statement, adults' learning should be understood as 'about the continuing process of making sense of everyday experience' (cf. Jarvis, 1992, p. 11) with *criticality*. I believe critical adult learning can be a discursive vehi- cle to create counter-hegemonic perspectives to the neoliberal discourses emanating from contemporary self-help books. Although 'critical' is quite a fluid concept, its meaning in adult learning is paralleled by the ideas of critical adult education researchers who have explored the democratic characteristics of adult learning such as Brookfield (1993, 2005) Collins (1991), Freire (1972), Kilgore (2001), Mezirow (1981), and Welton (1995). For them, '[critical] learning ... is reflecting on and challenging what we know and how we know it, and perhaps acting to change material and social conditions of oppressed people' (Kilgore, 2001,

p. 55). In this regard, one important pillar of critical adult learning is reflective
   thinking.

Reflective thinking is essential to critical awareness (Mezirow, 1981). More

specifically, it is

> an on-going process of dialogue through which there is a continuing re-creation of those indi- viduals involved in the reflective process .... [Thus] authentic reflection occurs in the challenge of living and thinking about life. (Freire, 1972; cited in Jarvis, 1987, p. 89)

Critical adult learning, therefore, contributes to alerting us to 'an unauthentic, distorted form of control' over learning conditions (Brookfield, 1993, p. 235). At the same time, it stimulates adult learners to move forward to 'social change or social transformation through progressive contextual interaction' (Lee & Madyun, 2008, p. 115).

In conclusion, critical adult learning is 'the process of reorganising one's epistemological framework as well as the process of reflecting upon one's own ontological position from one's

social contexts' (Lee & Madyun, 2008, p. 115). In this regard, it can help adult learners to be aware of the 'political geography of their social settings' (Lee & Madyun, 2008, p.115). As Brookfield points out, 'a critical theory of adult learning is inevitably also a theory of social and political learning' (2005, p. 31). Therefore, I propose that adult educators and researchers should revisit critical adult learning in order to further interrogate self-helping adult learners, which is currently being re-territorialised (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) term) by the neoliberal regime. In line with this, I conclude this article by quoting Ehrenreich's (2009) comment about happiness, which provides a platform for navigating counter-hegemonic discourses to neoliberal governance: 'A vigilant realism does not fore-close the pursuit of happiness; in fact, it makes it possible' (p. 205).

Notes

1. For example, Mclean and Vermeylen's (2014) study shows that self-help reading as informal adult learning plays an important role in addressing transition issues related to relationships and careers.
2. An exceptional case is UNESCO which has pursued a social democratic course in its lifelong learning discourse (see Lee, 2007; Lee & Friedrich, 2008, 2011).
3. The books were: three books by Blanchard and colleagues (1982, 2002, 2005), Bolles's (2014) *What color is your parachute?*, Byrne's (2006) *The secret*, Covey's (1989/2013) *The 7 habits of highly effective people*, Gladwell's (2008) *Outliers*, Miller's (2010) *In QBQ!*, Osteen's (2015) *The power of I am*, Peters's (1999) *The Brand you 50*, Robbins's (1991/2003) *Awaken the giant within*, Spencer's (1998) *Who moved my cheese?*
4. Unlike many other self-help experts, Blanchard has published his work in academic outlets, given his academic training (Ph.D. in educational administration and leadership at Cornell University).
5. According to the Wikipedia, this book has been sold over 26 million copies in 37 languages. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who_Moved_My_Cheese%3F
6. Sanneh (2010) explains Rhonda Byrne's concept of the 'law of attraction': it 'decrees that thoughts have physical power, and that thinking about something is the way to get it. If you want to stay poor, keep obsessing about your poverty; if you want to be rich, imagine yourself rich'.
7. According to Seo (2009), one of the most popular management and innovation strategies in the 1990s in South Korea was the so-called Balanced Scorecard (BSC). According to Richardson (2015) the BSC is implemented in four phases: '(1) translating the organisational vision into operational goals; (2) communicating the vision and linking it to individual unit performance;
(3) business planning; and (4) feedback and learning, and adjusting the strategy accordingly' (p. 468). For Seo (2009), the BSC views various activities, including social, inter-personal interactions, occurring in a workplace as learning and growth. Within this context, social, interpersonal and emotional dimensions in an individual's work life in an organisation are subject to management and innovation processes where individuals are named as self-directed lifelong learners (p. 199). Self-directed and commodified adult learners are evaluated through quantified metrics of their performance. In this regard, the BSC and learning portfolios can be viewed as tools for formulating quantified selves in the name of rational self-management.
8. Peck's (1978) self-help book *The Road Less Travelled* interprets self-discipline as self-caring.
9. At this point, I need to indicate a distinctive difference between Richard Bolles' *Parachute* book series and other help-books. While a vast majority of self-help books tend to focus on the statement such as 'I' achieve X, Y and Z because of 'my' efforts and passion, Bolles clearly pinpoints that 'We' accomplish things because 'God and I' work together in the grace of God.
10. This resonates with Strong's (1992) study, warning that self-help learning 'can ask too much of the adult learner and give too little' (p. 51).
11. This principle is called the Red Queen Effect or Hypothesis, proposed by Van Valen (1973).

12. This echoes Granovetter's (1973) concept of the strength of weak ties in a job market.
13. See Illouz's book (2007) titled *Cold Intimacies* for details about how therapeutic industry adopts self-realisation narratives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

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